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DINING-AROUND: A CULINARY EXPERIENCE TO INCREASE CULTURAL AWARENESS AMONG TOURISM UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the “Dining Around” assignment that was developed to increase the international exposure and awareness of undergraduate tourism students through a culinary experience by drawing on the ethnic restaurants in two University towns (University Park, PA and Columbia, MO). The implementation of the assignment at Penn State (RPTM 300) and at University of Missouri (PRT 4357) revealed that students welcomed the opportunity to experience other cultures as “local tourists” even within a simulated context. Importantly, this assignment showed that is useful to accomplish learning at different levels of the Cognitive and Affective domains of Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956).

Keywords: *Bloom’s Taxonomy; cultural awareness; in-class activity; international cuisine; tourism education.*

INTRODUCTION

The increasing globalization of post-university life demands that college students are exposed to a broad range of international experiences during their studies. Although the availability and variety of study abroad programs has grown and students’ participation across all majors has tripled in the 15 years, only an estimated 1% of students nationwide are able to actually experience living abroad (Institute of International Education, 2012). Accordingly, curriculum developers and education administrators increasingly seek to integrate an international component into class work aiming at educating students to become informed of the world around them. Creating a module that is both relevant to students and promotes cultural understanding is a challenging task, especially among those young Americans who haven’t had the opportunity to travel abroad or lived in a diverse community. This lack of international exposure is evident among students enrolled in tourism classes, including some majoring in Tourism. As a result, these students struggle to comprehend the complexity of the *tourist* experience. Seeking to broaden the cultural awareness among undergraduate tourism students at The Pennsylvania State University and the University of Missouri, the “Dining Around”

assignment was developed to introduce students to an unfamiliar foreign context through a culinary experience. This manuscript introduces the assignment and discusses its suitability for learning using Bloom's Taxonomy (1956).

THE DINING AROUND ASSIGNMENT

The "Dining Around" assignment seeks to increase the international cultural awareness among undergraduate tourism students through a simulated tourism experience by utilizing local ethnic restaurants. The assignment has two main objectives: (1) to increase the cultural awareness and international exposure of tourism undergraduate students through a culinary experience, and (2) to examine the role of food in tourism development. The assignment was first developed and implemented in 2010 among students enrolled in Tourism Behavior (RPTM 300) at Penn State. In spring 2012, the activity was assigned to undergraduate students enrolled in the Tourism Planning and Development course (PRT 4357) at University of Missouri with minor contextual adjustments.

The assignment is composed of two parts. The first part requires students to visit an authentic ethnic restaurant offering a cuisine with which the students are unfamiliar and to experience it as tourists might. At the restaurant, the students are required to order and eat (try) at least two of the traditional dishes (*entrée/appetizer* for example). Beverage choices are limited to water or an ethnic drink. To restrict students to authentic ethnic restaurants two guidelines are provided: (1) students cannot choose an ethnic chain (e.g., Taco Bell[®]; Panda Express[®]); (2) the following dishes are not allowed: tacos, enchiladas and burritos in local Mexican restaurants; and fried rice in Chinese restaurants. Additionally recommendations of specific ethnic restaurants applicable to each town (University Park, PA and Columbia, MO) are provided by both course instructors.

The second part of the assignment is a three-page written reflection essay (plus supporting materials) of the culinary experience. Students describe their experiences and discuss their impressions as a tourist. A list of topics is provided to guide (but not intended to limit) the discussion. These topics include: (1) the content and appearance of the menu as compared to those from typical American restaurants; (2) the ease/difficulty in choosing the dishes; (3) how the restaurant décor and ambience affect their culinary experiences; (4) how their interactions with the restaurant staff enhance the dining experience compared to employees in a chain-restaurant; (5) how the dining experience may affect the students' desire or interest to visit that country; and (6) how the meal differed from traditional American cuisine including how well they liked what they chose to eat.

Instructors introduced small variations on the assignments at their institutions. At the University of Missouri, an in-class discussion was held after the assignment was completed focusing on the role of food in tourism activities. Penn State students were encouraged to engage the restaurant staff in conversation about how the restaurant meal might compare to dishes served in a home of that country. If an Asian restaurant was chosen, the students were required to make an attempt to eat with chopsticks. The reflection papers of the students included their thoughts about how and why these foods and utensils might have evolved.

The assignment weighted ten percent at the Penn State, and about ten percent (40 points out of 500) at the University of Missouri. Both instructors graded the assignment based on the quality of the students' reflections. The submission of an itemized receipt with the report was required by both instructors. The in-class discussions at both universities were not graded.

DISCUSSION: EVIDENCE OF LEARNING IN ACTION

The implementation of "Dining Around" at both universities showed that the assignment accomplished learning at different levels of the Cognitive and Affective domains of Blooms' Taxonomy (1956). Bloom's Taxonomy is a holistic theoretical model that classifies educational goals in three domains, each of which is composed of different levels: (1) Cognitive domain includes six levels (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation); (2) Affective domain comprises five levels (receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, and characterizing); and (3) Psychomotor domain composed of seven levels (perception, set, guided response, mechanism, complex overt response, adaptation, and origination). Learning at the higher levels within each domain depends on having attained knowledge/skills at lower levels.

At the Cognitive domain, students were able to move beyond *knowledge* to the *analysis* and *synthesis* levels by linking the concepts of authenticity and tourists' typology (Cohen, 1972) within the context of their dining experience. Additional evidence of accomplishment at the Cognitive domain was evident during the post assignment discussion at University of Missouri, where students were able to discuss their culinary experience according to the role of food as a tourism attraction or impediment (Cohen & Avieli, 2004), the level of authenticity of food offered to tourists as compared to locals (Sims, 2009) and the role of food in tourism development (Everett & Aitchison, 2008).

At the Affective domain, students showed accomplishments at different levels, stating their enthusiasm and increased ethnic awareness. Some students even showed reaching the ultimate Affective level (*characterizing*) stating that the experience would influence their behavior. One student commented in his/her end of class evaluation, "I enjoyed the Dine Around assignment because it forced me to get out of my comfort zone, something I probably wouldn't have done on my own." Encouraging Penn state students to use chopsticks if dining in an Asia restaurant may have even developed some Psychomotor skill, although that was not an intended assignment goal.

Although the "Dining Around" assignment accomplished both their learning objectives at different levels, its implementation in the classroom was not except of challenges. Some students stated their concern with the economic burden (price) of the assignment; others were initially reluctant with its unconventional nature. However, taking into consideration the reduced obstacles as compared to the many educational benefits produced by this assignment, especially increasing students' critical thinking and cultural awareness, we recommend its use in similar contexts, especially within communities with limited cultural diversity.

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